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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001856

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARCH 14 CHRISTIANS CONTEMPLATING HALF
PLUS ONE VOTE

REF: BEIRUT 1854

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b)
and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) March 14 Christians, following what the view as the failure of the French initiative and worried that the Siniora government will come under mounting attack if a president is not elected soon, are engaging the Maronite church in an attempt to revive support for a half plus one vote. Convincing the Patriarch will be difficult, but the hope is that they can bring him on board by assuring him that they will stick with his list of candidates. Lack of March 14 unity on the way forward, however, may ultimately quash this endeavor. End summary.

2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by DCM and Pol/Econ Chief, met with Minister for Social Affairs Nayla Mouawad on November 24, the day after President Lahoud stepped down from office and parliament failed once again to elect a successor. "Everyone is laughing at us," Mouawad complained, saying the U.S. had not done enough to support March 14's efforts to elect one of its candidates. March 14's perception was that the U.S. had retreated during the process. The Ambassador countered that the U.S. deserved credit for helping to prevent a second government or military coup. If anyone was to blame for the failure of the French initiative, it was the Syrians, he said.

FRENCH INITIATIVE FAILS MARCH 14

3. (C) Mouawad, claiming French Charge Andre Parant admitted to her he had made a mistake in accepting Syria's approach without a fallback plan, said the French initiative had done a lot of damage. The mechanism was wrong, she said, and March 14 ended up with a gun to its head demanding Michel Edde or no one. March 14 had given up too much to accept such a compromise. "We've been dying," Mouawad said, referring to the four March 14 MPs who have been assassinated over the two years.

CLOCK IS TICKING FOR SINIORA GOVERNMENT

14. (C) Mouawad warned that it would be "deadly" for March 14 for the current situation to continue for more than a few weeks. The opposition would find a pretext, perhaps the declining economic situation, to attack the Siniora government. Furthermore, Lebanon's Christians would not tolerate for long what they viewed as a Sunni monopoly on the government in the absence of the (Maronite) president (despite the fact that 10 out of 17 remaining cabinet members are Christians). PM Siniora had gone to see the Patriarch that morning to demonstrate that his government was not trying to Islamize the country. The next step would be the November 28 extraordinary meeting between the Patriarch and the Maronite bishops. Mouawad was working with her contacts in the church to ensure that they issued a statement in support of the government.

PAVING THE WAY FOR A HALF PLUS ONE VOTE

15. (C) Mouawad saw two ways forward: either the parties continue their dialogue in an effort to find a consensus candidate (she did not see much hope for this scenario), or March 14 exercises its right to proceed with a half plus one vote, to elect (from best to worse options) Nassib Lahoud, Boutros Harb, Michel Khoury, or, a last choice, Michel Edde. The second option depended on the support of the international community, Mouawad stressed, noting that this support seemed to be coming back. She urged the U.S. to try to get support for a half plus one vote at the Annapolis conference.

16. (C) Admitting it seemed idealistic, Mouawad said she was trying to work with the Maronite church to set the conditions for proceeding with an absolute majority vote. Mouawad

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claimed the pro-March 14 bishops were angry at the pro-Syrian bishops who had supported Michel Edde and might be in a better frame of mind to accept an absolute majority. Now that there was a vacuum in the presidency, she hoped even the Patriarch could be convinced, especially if March 14 assured it would stick to his list.

COMMENT

17. (C) Given the Patriarch's bruising after having been persuaded, against his wishes, to name candidates for the French initiative, only to see that initiative fail, we do find it a bit idealistic to believe the Patriarch can now be convinced to accept a half plus one vote. In a meeting immediately following the Mouawad meeting, Hariri, who had met with the Patriarch the day before, told the Ambassador the French initiative had done so much damage to the Patriarch that it could not be undone. However, should the determined Mouawad prevail, this would provide the sort of moral covering that March 14 would need to proceed in this manner. We fear, however, that the opposition's threats of violence, even civil war, should March 14 go down this road, would weigh more heavily on the Patriarch than his desire to see one of his candidates elected.

18. (C) Of concern to us, moreover, is the fact that once again March 14 is having problems speaking with one voice. While Mouawad talks of a half plus one vote, the non-Christian March 14 leaders are pursuing an altogether different scenario: electing Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Michel Sleiman (reftel). Lebanese Forces leader (and Christian) Samir Geagea, whose militia fought many bloody battles with the LAF during Lebanon's 15 year civil war, almost certainly would lean toward Mouawad's strategy, by far the riskier of the two. For either to succeed, March 14 must be united. End comment.

FELTMAN